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ABSTRACT

Teachers' centers are places and programs for staff development that are designed and used by inservice teachers of their own volition to fill their self-identified training and curriculum needs. Centers operate on two basic premises. First is the assumption that teachers, rather than educational researchers, can most accurately assess their own professional needs, based on direct classroom experience. Teachers can then speak to their own and others' needs in the design of inservice facilities and programs. The second assumption deals with the developmental nature of the learning process. Teacher-initiated inservice programs allow participants to learn at their own pace and in the areas most appropriate to their own interests. This leads to a more enduring acquisition and improvement of teaching skills. The overall effectiveness of a teachers' center hinges upon the successful incorporation of communication, collaboration, and direct experience into a program format that is both accessible and attractive to teachers who may be wary of researcher-based inservice education programs. (LH)

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Teachers' Centers Exchange

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A Distinctive Option in Inservice, The Teachers' Center Meets Individual Needs and Institutional Goals

BY AMITY P. BUXTON

The taxpayers' revolt, cutting local school district budgets and staffs, is one of several new developments which are gradually altering the teacher's job, adding new and different responsibilities. Proficiency standards for learning in basic skills, desegregation, "mainstreaming," competency tests for teacher hiring and for student graduation, and parent participation in instructional planning are other new legislative mandates upon the schools. These new policies cause school boards and administrators to consider "delivering" unto teachers retraining and "staff development" programs aimed at adapting veteran teachers to new responsibilities. In this atmosphere of layoffs, reassignments, and new duties required of teachers, the experience of teachers' centers over the past ten years appears as a hopeful pattern for *self-help* rather than "delivery" of inservice programs. Such teacher-initiated inservice can produce substantial improvements in teachers' morale, expertise, initiative, and ingenuity for professional renewal. *(Editor's Note.)*

Teachers' centers are places and programs for staff development that are designed and used by teachers on their own volition to fill their self-identified training and curriculum needs. Several hundred teachers' centers currently operating in the United States represent an impressive variety, reflecting the diversity of local needs. Some centers function in empty classrooms or schools; some on university campuses; still others in community settings — storefronts, church basements, offices. There are urban, suburban, and rural centers. There are single-subject centers (for instance, mathematics, science, or arts) and comprehensive centers encompassing all curriculum areas. There are centers focusing on preschool, centers for secondary teachers, centers for K-6, K-8, K-12. Center staff may include professors, school district specialists, community consultants, or principals as well as teachers. Within this variety, the centers operate from two common assumptions about teachers' continuing learning.

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First assumption: Teachers have the most accurate information for assessing their professional needs, based on direct, individual experience in their classrooms, schools, and community. With this information they can work collaboratively with staff development specialists to conceive the general outline of an inservice facility, design specific programs on their own, and act as individuals to select specific activities for their own growth. A significant proportion of the teacher population *will*, over time, initiate this kind of professional self-renewal, *if* the program within which it is offered is practical, personally supportive, and energizing.

Second assumption: Learning is a developmental process; that is, it occurs most effectively, at a more natural pace, and with more enduring results when the learner identifies the problem or need; works directly with learning materials and other persons to gain the needed knowledge or skill; and applies the learning to the practical situation with ongoing support. Because learning proceeds developmentally, teachers' centers do not prescribe for teachers a specific course, time period, or frequency of participation. Rather, centers offer a variety of materials, experiences, experts, and work settings as well as ongoing, nonevaluative, advisory counseling — often provided in the classroom — as teachers undertake changes.

This theoretical basis for teachers' centers has kept them focused on the daily problems of teachers and their students in the midst of recurrent campaigns and crises of innovation, district reorganization, and budget cuts. Within fluctuating contexts, teachers' centers have been invisible catalysts of lasting growth for teachers and schools.

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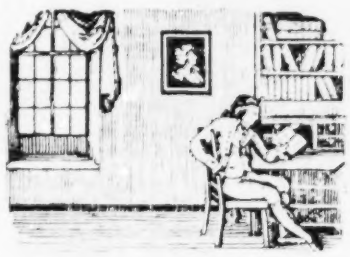
In the Beginning: Opposing Views About Centers

When the first teachers' centers began to operate, differences were unmistakable between center leaders and school district or university inservice experts. This polarity — defined by the very existence of teachers' centers run by and for teachers — resulted from a number of factors, some real and others imagined. Outsiders saw teachers' centers as places where the center leaders "did their own thing" — advancing the open education movement. Other critics went further: "Teachers don't know what they need, and centers don't understand the realities of a school district." The opposing view, held by many teachers' centers' devotees, was that district inservice programs were relatively useless to teachers inasmuch as they were designed and mandated by administrators or given by university professors, neither of whom knew practical classroom needs.



Currently, in places where centers are just beginning, one can hear these kinds of opinions echoed: "Teachers who need the help most won't come," say administrators. "I won't go to

This paper was presented in somewhat different form at a conference of the National Council of States on Inservice Education, San Francisco, November 1978.

Dr. Amity P. Buxton is co-founder of one of the first U. S. teachers' centers, the Teachers' Active Learning Center of San Francisco. Growing out of San Francisco State University's federal TTT (preservice/inservice) program in desegregating Sausalito and San Francisco school districts, TALC became an independently supported center for teachers from several Bay Area communities. In 1974, Oakland teachers planning their own district-supported center invited Amity Buxton to implement their "Teacher Shelter." She is now director of the Teacher Shelter, c/o Oakland Public Schools, 1025 Second Avenue, Oakland, California 94606.

mandated inservice. I want a say in what, how, when, who, and where!" say teachers.

In the following pages, I want to describe how this kind of polarized relationship has changed in one of the early centers, as center leaders and inservice personnel worked together over time to develop a collaborative relationship. During my ten years with the Teachers' Active Learning Center (TALC), now the Teacher Shelter in Oakland, California, I have experienced this change from polarity to collaboration. Other centers — in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New York City, St. Louis, Cleveland, Kansas City, and in dozens of smaller communities — can offer similar histories of school district, teachers' center, and university faculty working together.

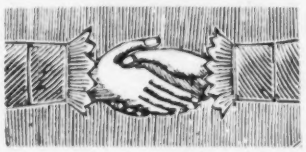
During the Middle Years: Developing a Positive Relationship

The changed relationship which has developed over the past ten years stems from three interrelated processes: communication, collaboration, and direct experience. These processes have taken place more often through an informal organizational structure.

Communication occurred at all levels and across levels: first, teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-principal, and teacher-to-school support personnel, by means of informal conversations in lunch rooms and formal announcements in faculty meetings; second, teachers' center staff communications to district or to university staff members — through memoranda, invitations to center events and workshops, telephone consultation, meetings, and official documents (such as program descriptions, program objectives, workshop calendars, quarterly reports).

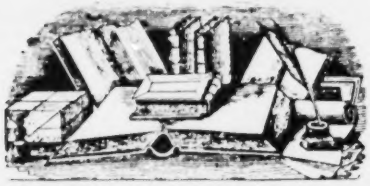
This persistent communication over time has created a cumulative network of relationships, a body of shared facts and experiences, and a growing sense of trust in the teachers' center way of doing things. We have kept describing and explaining *teachers' identification of their needs, voluntary participation* by teachers, the *cross section of participants* who use the center, teachers' *responsibility for their own learning*, the *developmental nature of teachers' (adult) learning* (like children's learning), and the *holistic view of the curriculum* as a framework for teachers' developing effective instructional programs for students.

Collaboration with the school district and with college of education faculties has included cooperative planning for programs in our various institutions, and providing resources for or actually conducting sessions in each other's programs. Professors use our center when their courses require active learning, interdisciplinary curriculum, or experienced teachers to work with their university students. Center staff members have taught university sessions in our various fields of expertise, and professors have sometimes been requested by teachers or staff to conduct center workshops. Extension and graduate divisions of a local university have allowed teachers to earn postgraduate credit for work undertaken in the center. Our teachers' center pattern for such accredited work is a series of sessions in the center or in the field, which individual teachers design to meet their own objectives (such as developing an interdisciplinary science unit or arranging a classroom environment better suited to the need for students to work individually). This collaboration has erased inservice specialists' early "do your own thing" image of the center.



The staff whom the Oakland teachers selected to initiate the Teacher Shelter brought foundation money as the major part of the budget. Now five years later, the district funds or secures funding for the largest segment of our budget. Furthermore, the center staff, at the request of district staff development administrators, provide parts of district-wide inservice programs, design special inservice for the staffs of single schools, and offer advisory help to teachers in their classrooms. More importantly, we do all of this district-wide inservice in the teachers' center mode of teachers defining their own needs, planning their professional studies coopera-

tively with center staff, and trying out and assessing in the classroom what they learned in the center. Working together patiently while acknowledging and respecting our differences develops credibility and trust between center staff and district personnel. Our working together has revealed the distinctive skills and perspectives of the Teacher Shelter, of the district staff developers, and of university professors.



The *direct experience* of observing the Teacher Shelter activities and effects in classrooms is the third component contributing to the district's positive view of the teachers' center as an inservice resource. These activities include construction of materials and consultation about classrooms, workshops and independent studies, small study groups and district-wide functions. As time passed and more teachers participated in these diverse Shelter activities, visible proof accumulated that a cross section of teachers were seriously using and valuing them. Furthermore, as teachers implemented what they had learned in the center, their classrooms and their students' work demonstrated the impact of the center.

Through this continual information sharing, mutual involvement, and observation of effects of teachers' center work, the views held by the Teacher Shelter staff and other inservice educators toward each other have changed. Now outsiders see the Shelter as another way of working with teachers, complementary to official district or university inservice programs. They see the center as credible and teachers' use of it as valuable in meeting district objectives. They see that teachers do know or can be helped to identify what they need. In turn, center personnel who have worked with other inservice programs perceive that other ways of conducting inservice are understandable from the administrator's perspective of management issues and community pressures. The center staff see the contribution of university professors as valuable in the matter of content and research findings. Over the ten years, the teachers' center and the other district inservice personnel have gradually identified mutual needs, and through personal experience, they have developed mutual respect and trust. Since the teachers' center was a newcomer in the field of inservice education, I believe the changed view of our work is the more significant development.

Toward the Future: Confronting Inservice Issues Together

The positive relationship which has developed between teachers' centers and district / university inservice seems to hinge upon the observed impact of the centers — that is, what the staff development administrators can see actually taking place in schools and classrooms because of teachers' work in the center, or because of center staff advisory work in the schools. This impact, of course, stems directly from the teachers' center concept and way of working with teachers. In teachers' centers, the role of the *teacher as decision maker in inservice and curriculum development* is the key and most provocative element. This basic teachers' center premise enhances our reputation and relationship with conventional inservice, but at the same time raises a challenge to that establishment.

In the Teacher Shelter, teachers

- Give ongoing input to program and policy
- Provide staffing help
- Conduct workshops
- Exchange ideas
- Develop curriculum ideas and activities
- Re-experience the learning process in order to bring back significant learning experiences to their students
- Engage in classroom research
- Extend support to other teachers
- Develop a new teacher-oriented perspective on staff development to take back to their schools.

What is a classroom advisor?

A classroom advisor's job is to listen rather than tell, help rather than show, support rather than evaluate. The classroom advisor assists teachers in their growth as professionals by standing beside, not above them, and by sharing in the processes of decision-making and problem solving.

How can we help you?

Name _____ School _____

Date _____ Phone _____

Tue 9-8
Wed 9-6
Thur 9-6

THE TEACHER SHELTER

314 East 10th St., Oakland, Ca, 94606 836-8316

To get an advisor here's all you have to do: Discuss it with your principal and call the Teacher Shelter. Classroom advisory visits may be scheduled on Mondays and on Thursday mornings.

The center staff provide ideas, encourage, assist, and guide teachers in

- Identifying their needs
- Planning their own learning program
- Assuming responsibility for continuing their learning beyond the center
- Developing curriculum to meet the needs of their students
- Sharing data and experiences with other teachers to extend their joint understandings.

This interrelated complex of activities demonstrates that teachers' ownership of a center involves far more than having teachers simply form the majority of its policy board.

A second basic premise of teachers' centers which challenges an ongoing relationship with traditional forms of inservice education is the *plurality of options* offered teachers, including *voluntary participation*. This plurality of options does not easily fit into the efficiency model of school district inservice or of a university department's formula for continuing education courses. The Teacher Shelter and Oakland Public Schools' inservice staff have worked through these differences in several

ways. One was the district-supported inservice which the Shelter provided for fifth-grade teachers in fall 1979. (See "Teacher Shelter Provides Fifth-Grade Staff Development" in this paper.) The Shelter also supplies multi-optional inservice for the faculty of a single school. The Shelter can help teachers define their objectives and then can provide choice of instructors (university, district, teachers, community, students); choice of format (seminar, lecture, media presentation, hands-on workshop, in-classroom advisory work, on-site facilitation of staff collaboration, school-site inservice); choice as to size of learning groups; and choice as to frequency of involvement (intensive, periodic, occasional). The Shelter also offers in-classroom advisory assistance for teachers who request help in implementing new curriculum, meeting district objectives, or solving a classroom problem. The Shelter staff devote one and one-half staff days per week to in-classroom advisory service, for which *teachers* initiate the request after discussion with their principals (see "What is a Classroom Advisor" in this paper).

Because of the continuing striving to redesign public education and to retrain or revitalize teachers, and because of the challenges — teacher decision making, options for learning, and voluntarism — which the teachers' center concept poses to conventional inservice, we can hope to cement the collaborative relationship between centers and inservice only by conscientiously addressing some basic issues. I state them here as principles which can serve as starting points for mutual discussion.

1. As professionals, teachers can be *continuing* learners, curriculum makers, and researchers.
2. In any organized educational renewal process, teachers and administrators should share in commitment, decision making, and responsibilities for implementation.
3. Planning and assessment for changing or renewing schools must be ongoing, not merely a year-opening orientation and a year-ending evaluation.
4. Teachers and administrators alike need continuing support throughout the implementation stage of new educational programs.
5. A long-term time frame is the only realistic basis for bringing about lasting educational improvement.

If school district and university specialists in staff development, teachers' centers' staffs, and teachers together address these issues and the practical problems they raise, then there is greater likelihood that the broad range of needs in schools, districts, and regions can be met practically, imaginatively, and comprehensively.

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The key to collaboration between inservice and teachers' centers lies in the recognition that the teachers' center represents a distinctive option among many. Its distinguishing attributes are that it is *developmental* in its view of how teachers learn; *integrated* and *substantive* in its choice of curriculum; and *supportive, active, nonevaluative,* and *professional* in its style of working with teachers. If teachers' centers do not hold to these values I fear they will become "just another inservice," adding no new perspective or energy to the critical tasks facing public education. If centers remain distinctive, inclusion of this option can extend the staff development program of a district or region so that it can meet both individual teachers' needs and institutional objectives. From my perspective of ten years of center work, I see the teachers' center role in this collaboration to be the mediator of differing views, the designer of new forms, and the supporter of teachers' professional growth as they themselves determine it.

Teacher Shelter Provides Fifth-Grade Staff Development For Oakland School District

The objective of the fifth-grade staff development week was to provide 20 teachers the opportunity to identify, plan, and participate voluntarily in a week of activities for professional renewal. The program for the week was determined by teachers on the basis of their individual classroom needs, with Teacher Shelter and district staff taking into account evaluations of previous inservice programs. Every fifth-grade teacher in the district was invited to participate, and the first 20 who responded were those selected (no more than one per school). Activities offered were discussions, workshops, classroom observations, making learning manipulatives, reading, research, and curriculum ideas with follow-up options such as study groups in the center or classroom advisory support from Shelter staff.

Teacher Shelter staff and the assistant planner of the Division of Learning planned the week with the 20 teachers, first explaining the Shelter's philosophy of identifying learner-initiated needs. Each teacher then completed a planning worksheet to identify individual needs for the week's program. Finally, each teacher reported to other participants about what he or she wanted to accomplish for professional growth.

Teacher Shelter staff and the Division of Learning assistant planner then analyzed the entire list of needs, grouped them according to appropriate instructional topics, and began to identify resource persons in the district, community, or university who could help the teachers meet their objectives. The areas specified (in order of number of needs identified) were language arts, mathematics, reading; curriculum ideas (individualized or interdisciplinary); arts; classroom organization; classroom management; social studies; diagnosis/assessment; bilingual instruction; district resources; science; student motivation; and manipulative materials.

Teacher Shelter staff were available on an ongoing basis to help individuals or groups who wanted intensive study on one topic. (For example, one teacher wanted to develop an interdisciplinary science curriculum around a snake one of her students had brought to class.) District and Shelter staff also located fifth-grade teachers whose classrooms were outstanding in the areas of teachers' needs. Permission was secured for participants to observe these classrooms mid-week.

The learning process for the week was participatory, ongoing, and developmental. Through released time, teachers could spend the entire five days on their learning programs. Large-group, small-group, and individual activities were offered. Resource persons included district curriculum specialists, classroom teachers, a researcher, an area planner, a principal, a school resource teacher, and a university graduate student. In addition, participants themselves acted as resource persons for each other by bringing samples of their own successful teaching units or

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students' work. Regular participants of the Teacher Shelter program offered ideas and assistance, too.

On the last afternoon participants filled out an assessment worksheet. Evaluations stressed the importance of the learning to teachers both personally and professionally.

> "In general, it fulfilled and surpassed my hopes for the week because . . . [there was freedom] to attend scheduled workshops or work on my own concerns; workshops were well-organized and full of fine ideas."

> "I received a multitude of resources. I met new people, many specialists, found new methods for up-dated ideas. I gained more than I had ever anticipated. This opportunity should not end. It should be ongoing . . . with all grade levels."

> "It gave me a whole book of new ideas! Reenergized and reexcited me and gave me time to reflect on, reevaluate my own program; gave opportunity to relate to people from other schools."

• • •

To continue the exchange of expertise, participants asked for reunions to be scheduled in the following months. One was held in January and another in May to share implemented practices. Nearly half of the group came voluntarily to report on lessons, materials, and children's work that were outgrowths of the staff development week. One example is an integrated language arts/arts project using masks and autobiographical essays (which became a Teacher Shelter workshop and a display in the center).

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